

August 27, 2008

SUBJECT: Hearing Testimony to the Maryland Commission on Capital Punishment
FROM: Sharon E. (Ward) Blickenstaff, Hagerstown, Maryland

My name is Sharon Ward Blickenstaff, the only child of Anna Catherine and John Roy Ward. I am both honored and humbled for the opportunity to speak to you on behalf of my father, John Roy Ward. My father was murdered by Robert Stephen Robinson on Sunday night June 30, 2002. My husband and I found his body on Monday morning, July 1, 2002 inside his home on Huyett Lane South in Hagerstown.

In order to understand my position on the death penalty, you first need to meet my father. My father was 87-year-old John Roy Ward, born March 12, 1915. He was blind, and lame. He quit school in the fifth grade, and had been the victim of child abuse. He was a father, husband, farmer, veteran, and member of the Civil Conservation Corps during the depression, a taxpayer and a hard worker. His survivors are one daughter and a son-in-law, a 90-year-old sister, living in Florida, a nephew in Virginia, and a cat named "Skeeter".

As a young child his father would bounce him on his knee by his ears until they bled. His father drank, his parents fought. One day the fight was over a rope swing in the yard. My Grandmother took a handsaw and instructed my Dad to hold the swing while she cut the rope. The saw slipped striking him in the right eye. She wrapped rags around his head and sat him on the porch in the sun for the summer until it healed. He was seven and now blind in one eye. My aunt tells me she can still hear his screams. The family moved continually. He quit school in the fifth grade to work on farms for food and money. He was raised in a day and a time when, if you didn't work, your family was hungry.

My father and mother married in 1944, purchasing the property at Huyetts as he went off to war. He served with the Army Air Transport Command in the South Pacific campaign, serving in Guam, New Guinea, the Philippines and Japan. During the war, my mother worked as a cashier and bookkeeper at Abe Martins Grocery store on the Hagerstown Square. Using all of the monies he sent her, their home was paid for when he returned. They moved into the house in 1947. They lived there until their deaths.

Shortly before my eighth birthday, Daddy was sick. I was afraid from the moaning and vomiting sounds that he was going to die. Doctors made house calls then, giving him a shot of the new drug penicillin, I can still hear my Daddy saying, "My God Doc what was in that shot, I can't see". The shot took the sight in his left eye. He was now blind in both eyes. Our lives changed from that point. We lived five miles from town. My mother didn't work and could not drive. Our minister helped to find a doctor at Johns Hopkins who was able to cut a diamond shape in the saw damaged right eye leaving him with perferorial side vision only. He would never see looking straight ahead only the outline of hair and shoulders until his death. He identified you by the sound of your voice.

So from eight years old, I helped look for plow parts lost in dirt, mower teeth lost in the hay field, an array of nuts, bolts, nails, and screws dropped in the grass, on floors and next to buildings. He didn't give up: he mowed his grass, plowed his garden, painted walls, mended fences and bloodied his hands fixing roofs and building little projects. His fingers had become his eyes; and he unknowingly taught his daughter many different skills. His little girl would wait for him to go into the house after the garden was planted, then sneak out to cover the seeds in the rows that he couldn't see. She would pull weeds left next to the plants and plant back the vegetables that he had hoed out. He lost most of his independence, but over many years taught himself to use the little vision he had left. He never became bitter, or complained or quit working to keep his family.

In April of 1967, he went to a farm animal auction with a neighbor. On their return the neighbor left him out of the car on the opposite side of Greencastle Pike. He crossed that road and a drunk driver followed him down the embankment, running over him in the grass. I can still see the car and the old man as I sat on our porch steps. This accident nearly severed his right leg below the knee and left him with a permanent limp that grew worse as he aged.

All of this brings me to today. I am the daughter of a man that, through circumstance, was victimized by others his entire life. This was a man who told his sister the two best days of his life were the day he married Catherine and the day his daughter was born. Most of his life he worked mowing grass or making burial vaults, losing his barber and machinist trades along with his eyesight. He worked every day, never taking what did not belong to him or asking for assistance. My mother and I spent most of our lives looking out for him. After her death in 1997 the mantle of watching over him fell upon me.

We established a simple rule, "When you get awake in the morning, you call me so that I know that you are ok." "When I get home at night I'll call you." Every morning the conversation was "This is your Dad checking in". Always I asked, "Are you ok? What are you going to do today?" Many days I called him at lunch to ask, "Do you need anything from town?" Each evening the conversation was, "I'm home. What did you do today? Did anyone call, and did anyone visit?" He would tell me who came, or called and what task he accomplished. His home is on a dead end road, and there is a liquor store on the corner, so I worried. He knew every rock and every rut on the property and every inch of the house and outbuildings, having lived there fifty-five years. I thought he would be safe. He could be gruff, which was his defense, so that most people didn't know he was blind. He always had a strong opinion and expressed that opinion.

We don't eat much prepared food, and every meal I cooked enough for one more person so he would have variety in his meals other than hot dogs and frozen turkey pies that he loved, taking him goody bags, including peas that he didn't like. Six years later I still can't seem to cook for two people. Two to three days a week on my way to work, I drove down his road and through the driveway to be sure he was safe; that there were no tire tracks on his lawn and the buildings were not disturbed. He never knew. If there was trash in his yard, I picked it up so he wouldn't run over it with the mower. If there were snow, my husband would drive tracks through the driveway to give the impression of

activity. Packages ordered would be sent to his address; they represented another person for him to have contact.

Anyone he ever asked to help repair, weed whack, or paint he paid. I know he was lonely except for "Skeeter" his buddy. He was 87 but had a goal: he wanted to "live to be the oldest Ward that ever was". He would need to be 106 for that record; if it were his choice, he would still be living. Every Saturday morning was ours. I took him to the grocery store telling him what items were on the shelf and asking what items he needed, most of which he committed to memory because he couldn't see to make a list. We went to Corderman's Hardware for small items, Holsingers for meat: the places where people would be kind to a slow, elderly man with a cane who couldn't see to read labels and needed help paying for his purchase. People who were patient as his daughter counted out his change for them. Every Saturday morning I read his mail to him, walked over the property to see if it was ok, and let him know what plants were coming up, put his pills in a container so that he took them properly, replaced light bulbs, hung curtains, dusted and any other chores that he felt his daughter could do. When we returned from our trip to town, I would drive through his driveway, if there were trash asking if he knew how it got there. For six years after my mother died, I kept his checkbook, paid his bills, drove him to all his medical appointments all the while going in early or staying late at work so that my job was not put at jeopardy for the little care my Dad needed. Now there is only sadness every Saturday morning that in six years has not subsided. All of this has left a huge hole in my heart and life that I can't seem to mend with daily tears of repentance for my failure to keep him safe in his own home.

Each year he trimmed my Christmas tree for me, hanging things backwards and securing lights on with long twisty ties, because he liked to do it, even though it took him a whole day. He helped me make cookies. For all of these attempts I didn't keep him safe. The last words I heard him speak were "Come on Skeeter, lets get our supper", as he was hanging up the phone on Sunday night. If cats could only speak, what a tale Skeeter could tell.

As your parents age you expect to lose them, but not like this. Not at the hand of someone who stakes you out and comes uninvited into your home with malice, and forethought and armed. Taking my Dad's life wasn't a happen stance; there was only one house on the road, and one old man to choose.

On the evening of Sunday June 30, 2002, my father's home was forcibly entered, he was beaten with a tire iron, and stabbed three times in the chest with such force and penetration, 7 and 8 inches, that the knife cut through his ribs on its way to his heart, his liver and lungs. He was stabbed in the back repeatedly at least 8 times, the knife penetrating 4 to 6 inches, as he lay bleeding to death on his kitchen floor. His hands were cut as he attempted to defend himself from an attacker he could not see. There were so many gashes in his head that I could not count them all. My husband Danny and I found him at 6:30AM on the morning of July 1, 2002. Our lives were forever changed on that morning.

Every day since Monday morning July 1, 2002 I see my life through a stained glass window. Stained glass windows are supposedly beautiful, but mine though colorful, is tainted. I see the pale yellow walls of our kitchen where I grew up. I see the yellow and gray kitchen chair that my parents bought for housekeeping, with the seat stained dark red; knowing that he sat there bleeding profusely. I see Daddy face down on the blue, white and gray floor with his head turned to the right, the tip of his nose is bent to the right, there is a mark on his right temple where his head must have hit the chrome corner of the kitchen stove when he fell, for there is dried dark red blood there too. His dark right eye is open and beginning to cloud gray white. There are gashes in the back of his balding gray head. His aqua, tan and cream shirt, a father's day gift has many slits in the back, his arms are up palms down as if protecting his face and head from blows, his gold wedding band is red crusted with his blood. His green hand towel is on the floor at his head as if used and discarded there. There is a river of various shades of red, his blood, running over the floor: around his face and arms between the blue green legs of his pants past the black shoes on his little feet, as if he stood up fell forward and didn't move again; his blood outlining his body. I see his house ransacked; doors and drawers opened, his possessions scattered about.

Robert Steven Robinson confessed to causing his death. Made no apology and showed no remorse when sentenced to life in prison for his action. Such a cold-blooded act should have been punishable by death. My father's death was a heinous, brutal, vicious and senseless act. After murdering my father Mr. Robinson and his cousin Otho Wayne Robinson broke into Shifler Equipment Company across the road and painted the car they were driving. They stole a truck and proceeded to spend Sunday night looting my father's house and garage, loaded tools from Shifler Equipment, and drove into West Virginia to sell the items. They stole the food from my father's freezer, taking it to 40 West Lounge. They gave his food away while bragging about their adventures of the evening. Mr. Robinson was so brazen, that he attempted to sell some of my father's tools to neighbors while the police were canvassing the neighborhood on Monday morning. Mr. Robinson is a career criminal, having been convicted, sentenced and paroled on a regular basis throughout his life. There are evil people who once imprisoned should not be permitted to walk among us, being allowed to choose their next victim. Mr. Robinson had been released on parole by the State of West Virginia at the time he murdered my father.

Each year, we, the survivors are subjected to the cries of "cruel and unusual punishment" from the supporters of criminals. Each year, I wonder how many of those death penalty opponents have been in the survivor's or the victim's shoes. Would their opinion and attitude change if they were to find their father or mother beaten and left to die in the supposed sanctity of their own homes? "Suppose we put an innocent person to death" is also a common statement. Who cares for the truly innocent people who are put to death by the hand of a criminal? Cruel and unusual punishment: the murder's victims are put into a situation where their cries of pain and pleas for mercy fall on uncaring ears. Who stands for the true victims? Who gives them a voice? Who cares for the families and the survivors?

In the eyes of the Maryland justice system, my father's murder was a felony first-degree premeditated murder punishable by the death penalty. There is no excuse, there is no justification for this vicious behavior on the innocents of our community; not drug use, not alcohol use, not mental slowness. There are programs for all of these; all funded by the tax paying innocent prey of the criminal. Criminals are portrayed as poor misunderstood, abused, victims of circumstance or of the system when in fact they are the product of the system. Our system lets repeat criminals out again, and again, knowing full well they will return after preying on yet one more innocent victim. In Maryland, it seems those who truly matter to the government are the criminals and their families. I have learned all too well that in Maryland these are the only people with rights. The victims have no rights; their survivors have no rights. Only the criminal who committed the act has rights. We have received anonymous mail from prisoners, telling of how Steven Robinson boasted of murdering my father. We sit through court hearings listening to attorneys rationalize on behalf of the criminal and somehow turn the perpetrator into a victim. Mr. Robinson stated that he attended school only until the third grade; so, does this give him the justifiable right to take the life of a man who attended school until the fifth grade, and then receive a commuted sentence? Mr. Robinson confessed, so let's give him a deal. Let's not give him the death penalty, rather a life in prison; but not life without parole, that would be cruel. In my family, two of us have been given a life sentence at the hands of Mr. Robinson. My father's life was taken. My life sentence is to make certain that Mr. Robinson does not get released from prison, but truly spends the rest of his life removed from public access. He made the promise that he would serve the life sentence and I will be one to see that this time he keeps his word. A life sentence should indeed be a life sentence.

The same rationale for criminals has been used recently in more high profile cases than that of my father. The fact of the matter is that Jeffrey Wroten, who was also killed in Hagerstown by a repeat criminal, would still be living had his killer Morris been put to death for his past crime. Explain if you can, to the Wroten family that the death penalty is not a deterrent. My father worked everyday of his life to support his family, and pay his taxes; to the State of Maryland his life mattered little. Sadly, no one in our government appears to care for those whose lives are taken or their families. The Maryland justice system puts the burden to keep the offender in jail on the victim's survivors. How dare the State allow sentenced murders to earn credits for good behavior in order to be paroled prior to the completion of the sentence, and again have the opportunity to prey on the innocent? The State requires that sex offenders be listed on a website so that citizens may know who their neighbors truly are. Why are released murders not required to have the same listing? Why do we not have the right to know there are murders living in our neighborhood? In my father's situation, the death penalty was a reasonable price to pay for the act committed. The sentence given to John Ward by Robert Robinson will not allow my father to be released by earning credits for good behavior.

If the Maryland system of justice functions as it has in the past, Mr. Robinson will once again be a free man. This crime experience for my family, began as a felony murder punishable by death, and ended when Mr. Robinson confessed, with so let's give him a deal. Hearing Mr. Robinson's confession will bring you closure I was told. Closure is a

pleasant sounding word used to inform the victim that the criminal has negotiated a deal. For victims and survivors the word closure is a lie. The reality is that an appeal or a plea will be filed. The survivor can only pray that judges look at the criminal act and the victim, and deny the request. The reality is also counting the years until parole is a possibility and knowing that "good" prisoners may be released early. The reality is wondering if he or his family will someday have me, or my family in their cited cross hairs as yet another target.

When my father died, the Baltimore Sun published a two page photographic story with information supplied by his neighbors. The article was titled "No Where's Safe", what a sad commentary on the State of Maryland, when murder comes to a rural little community like Huyetts. Since my father's death, murder in Washington County is now commonplace. How can our Legislature, elected to enact laws to protect citizens, believe that only the lives of politicians, police or correction officers or witnesses matter? Are severe penalties to be reserved for only an elite few? How can we justify to the law-abiding taxpayers that keeping evildoers alive is somehow a benefit? I thought that under the law justice was blind. The caption of the newspaper article was correct; our state is swiftly becoming a place where nowhere is safe.

In conclusion, thank you to Delegate Chris Shank and Senator Don Munson for this opportunity to give my father John Roy Ward a voice and for their understanding and support on behalf of the true victims of crime. My appreciation for the Maryland State Police, to Greg Johnston, who was the first responder, Otis Whitaker and Christina Becker and the many men and women from the crime lab and ATF, and the Washington County State's Attorney's office for their tireless hours of work on behalf of my father, the true victim of this crime.

Thank you for listening to this victim's voice.

Sharon Ward Blickenstaff and Danny J Blickenstaff
Daughter and Son in law of John Ward

